No. 73

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

Anxiety caused her to call Mr. Shields up in an effort to ascertain what the will contained. "I am sorry I am not in a position to tell you that," he replied to her pointed question.

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Chapter 238

THE OTHER MAN

WALTER WAYNE left Mrs. Prescott with a feeling of strange misgiving in his heart. He was puzzled and deeply worried. He could not understand why she insistently placed so many obstacles in the way of their immediate marriage. She was the only woman in the world he cared for and he wanted her.

What mattered her age? She was young in spirit and more beautifully youthful in appearance than many girls of twenty.

He was disappointed at not finding Mr. Prescott at home. He had gone out for the evening with a party of friends.

It seemed like an age to wait until the following morning, but there was nothing else to be done under the circumstances.

The night was long and restless. He arose at an unusual early hour and called the Prescott residence.

The master of the house was still in bed and the servants refused to disturb him unless the matter was very urgent.

Wayne waited impatiently until nine o'clock, then called again. This time he was more successful.

Prescott, seated at the breakfast table, rose and answered the phone himself. A dark frown overspread his face as the man at the other end of the line asked for an interview.

"Come to my office this afternoon at two," he said, and hung up the receiver.

Wayne had never met Mr. Prescott. Promptly at two o'clock he presented himself at the latter's office down-town.

In a large, remote room, more suggestive of a luxurious library than a commercial office, Walter Wayne faced a big handsome man of about forty. He seemed rather a pompous sort of an individual.

"I am the man who called you up this morning," the visitor began, coming straight to the point. "Wayne is my name. I mentioned that I wanted to see you about —about your wife."

"Yes, my wife," the other repeated somewhat absentmindedly and smiled.

Wayne, irritated by the smile, frowned darkly.

"Yes, about my wife," Prescott said again. "Won't you sit down?"

The caller took a chair and waited for a moment.

"You—you are an attorney, perhaps?" inquired Prescott.

"No," Wayne replied quickly. "I am not here in a professional way. I came as a friend."

"A friend, eh?" the other chuckled.

"Yes, and I might as well tell you first of all that I have asked Mrs. Prescott to marry me."

"I see," Prescott rolled a cigarette fastidiously between his thumb and forefinger. "It wouldn't be exactly the conventional thing for me to congratulate you, would it?" he smiled. "But I am sure I do. She is a very excellent woman, Mr. Wayne. Yes, in many ways I dare say she is remarkable."

The speaker glanced casually at his cigarette, then went on:

"You know, I lived with her for seventeen years, and I ought to know She is a woman any man might be proud of. She is wonderfully beautiful and——"

"I am glad to hear you say that," Wayne interrupted sowewhat less warmly than he wished.

"For your sake and hers," the other continued, "I hope you have a large income, Mr. Wayne."

The other looked up swiftly.

"I think I can make her comfortable," he said.

"That is quite an important factor—in fact, about the most important with a beautiful and spirited woman like Marian," Prescott remarked. "Don't take me as saying anything disparaging.

"It is common with the sex, especially in cases where women have been raised to expect certain things.

"Luxuriousness is the feminine vice, isn't it?" He glanced out of the window as though caught by an idea. "But it adds to their charm—perhaps it is safer to call it a charm than a vice. I want Marian to be happy in her next venture."

"If I might say so," Wayne suggested, "much as I like to hear Mrs. Prescott praised, I have come on a less agreeable errand."

Prescott regarded his visitor sharply.

"You have, eh?" he smiled in a peculiar fashion.

"Yes."

"And what is this errand, Mr. Wayne?"

"I want you to tell me the causes which led up to your divorce from your wife," came back quickly.

The two men stared at each other.

Prescott removed another cigarette from the gold case and turned it lightly on his wrist.

It became very evident that he was reluctant about approaching the subject.

"I am sorry that I must refuse to oblige you, sir," he said. "Had we wished to give out the facts to our friends, Mrs. Prescott and I should never have had the case held in secret court.

"We agreed at the time that it was a matter between us alone, and it must remain that way—between us alone."

Wayne's face flushed.

"Perhaps you will feel differently when I tell you that it was Mrs. Prescott herself who sent me here to ask you, sir."

Mr. Prescott shook his head slowly.

"If you will pardon my stubborness, I can't believe that. She wouldn't — its the last thing in the world she would ask me to do. Really, Mr. Wayne, you must—you must pardon——"

The latter interrupted by dropping the explanatory letter on the desk a few inches from Prescott's elbow.

Prescott arched his brows, reached for the letter, then slit the envelope and drew out the carefully folded sheet of paper.

While he read, the expression of his face denoted surprise.

A space of disagreeable silence ensued.

The letter was again lying on the desk where it had been flung by its reader.

"I beg your pardon," Prescott murmured. "You are right, Marian does want me to tell you about the details which led up to our divorce. In fact she is very urgent about it."

He moved his chair closer and laid a kindly hand on the visitor's knee.

"Let me tell you first of all, young man, that you are about to borrow a great fund of disappointment and grief for yourself," he went on. "And it will mean sorrow for her. I can't understand the necessity of it. But if you both insist——"

Wayne nodded angrily.

"We do insist. I most emphatically."

"Well, it isn't easy for me to name this thing," Prescott said. "The most charitable way would be to put it this way: Marian is a mercenary woman."

Wayne's jaw was set and his cheeks paled.

"I don't understand you," he returned wrathfully. "It is not the term to apply to a good and virtuous woman."

Prescott studied his visitor for a long while before he spoke again. He knew that he had to say some very disagreeable things which cost him an effort.

"I suppose it is best to be frank with you," he muttered.

"That is what I want, absolute frankness," Wayne shot back.

"Well, then, my dear young friend, Marian is not a good and virtuous woman," the other retorted. "I wish to heaven I could make it easier for you."

The other's clenched fist came down on the desk with a bang.

"Explain!" he cried, his eyes aglow. "I want you to explain thoroughly. You can't leave it like that!"

"Very well, I will, and I can do it in a very few words," Prescott returned without flinching. "Marian sold herself to a rich man for five thousand dollars."

"My God!"

Walter Wayne seem to spit out the words and the corners of his mouth hardened into bitterness.

"She—she must have loved him, Mr. Prescott," he suggested in a low tone.

"Love him?" the other laughed. "No, she never loved any human being beside herself. That is not in her. She did not sell herself for love She sold herself for clothes, expensive, luxurious clothes I could not afford to buy for her."

The room became terribly silent, like a ruined city after the bombardment.

"I am very sorry," Prescott said at last, "that you and my former wife insisted upon me telling you this. I could have said a kinder thing, but that would have been a lie. You wanted my real cause for my divorce. Well, you have it. Is there anything else, Mr. Wayne?"

The latter sat up straight, his eyes flaming now, with danger lurking in them.

"That does not satisfy me," he glowered darkly. "You have hinted enough to make a full explanation imperative, and I must have it before I leave your office."

Prescott stroked his moist forehead with the palm of his hand.

"If you insist, alright," he commented, "but it is not a pleasant story. It is a life story and you might head it 'The Price of Luxury'. To begin with, Marian and I married shortly after I left college.

"Her family was a good one, but they had gone suddenly broke, leaving her with the instinct to spend and the problem of poverty.

"We were not rich, but managed to have plenty of decent clothes and more than enough to eat. Then my business expanded and money rolled in. We rose a great deal faster than we ever dreamed we would.

"It landed us in the most exclusive residence section in a house whose yearly rental was more than I ever imagined I would be able to pay. I fattened on my steady income, worked hard, and was on the way to wealth.

"During the summer months we lived in a country home. I could afford that, and plenty of other things.

"Marian bloomed under prosperity, and of course, she and our boy were the ones who reaped the benefit, as it was right they should."

Prescott paused here, and the lines about his

mouth tightened.

"I have always had a keen sense of humor, Mr. Wayne," the former husband went on. "Since the days of my youth I have had an ideal wife, but she was, I confess, very fastidious.

"As I said, I had a keen sense of humor, and a stronger sense of honor.

"The mother of my boy must be without taint, just as I expect my son to keep strictly to the code of a gentleman. I couldn't forgive an unworthy thing in a child of mine, and that is why I am doubly thankful he has been saved to me after the wreck of my life."

Prescott cleared his throat.

"You were going to say something, Mr. Wayne," he inquired somewhat huskily.

When the other shook his head, he continued:

"It seemed we had become socially ambitious. My wife's beauty and brains took us where money couldn't. She had to spend furiously to get her effects, but I regarded extravagance as more or less of a necessity those days.

"She was vanity-mad then, but I was too prosperous to care.

"As might have been expected, she had a flock of what I termed harmless admirers. I am not a jealous man and I have always prided myself on that.

"But there was one man I always resented, because I had heard something about his reputation. I tolerated him coldly for social reasons. He was not a native of our city. He came from New York.

"No doubt you recall his name because the big financiers here made quite a fuss over him because he had an office in Wall Street."

"What was his name?" Wayne inquired as Prescott paused again.

"Fredericks, the filthiest pup that ever infested the earth," came back vehemently. "He had come to Chicago to attend a bankers' meeting, but he remained longer for a reason I learned later.

"At that particular time I met with heavy financial reverses. To be perfectly plain, I went bankrupt. I thought Marian was taking it like a loyal sport when I saw her part with some of her diamonds and other things I knew were dear to her."

Prescott paused at this point, took a long breath and lit another cigarette.

Chapter 239

A WOMAN WITHOUT HONOR

WALTER WAYNE'S mental state can be more easily imagined than described. He had come prepared to listen to an unpleasant truth, but it never occurred to him that he would hear a story such as he had been listening to. Of course, there was no withdrawing now. And he did not want it. His deep-rooted love for Marian gave him the needed courage and strength.

He waited patiently for Mr. Prescott to continue. The latter resumed his narrative after having taken a few vigorous puffs at his cigarette. He went on:

"We were compelled to move into a stuffy little flat on the outskirts of the city, and we agreed that our boy should not know anything about it.

"We kept him at school away from home on one pretext or another, hoping to get back to prosperity. It wasn't long before I was pained to find that Marian was not standing up to the test of poverty.

"She had taken to secret crying spells and it was harder and harder to bring her into my confidence.

"Twice she came to me asking for money to spend on clothes. It was natural to a pampered woman of her sort. But I could not answer her patiently with the sheriff banging at our door.

"Circumstances had called her to play a wife's part and she answered with the cry of a peacock.

"A third time she came to me. My explanations of our condition had made no impression upon her, apparently. She resorted to nagging, and to relieve the

strain I managed at a dangerous sacrifice, to get her about half the amount she asked for.

"It was ghastly. For the first time I began to see the silly selfishness of the woman who had made me promise on our wedding day that, come what might, I should never lose my ideal of her.

"A week later I received a frightful shock. Fredericks had been coming to see us as usual. And——"

Prescott, as though to evade the issue by a delay, pressed a button at his desk.

A bright boy appeared.

"Have Mr. Norris get the envelope marked with the number nine out of the safe," he ordered, then again faced the visitor.

"As I said, that man Fredericks continued his friendship with us just the same as ever. I thought it was pretty decent of him, as it gave Marian a taste of opera, good shows and good food which was life to her.

"The big trouble was that my wife had never the proper clothes to wear for these occasions, and I had to bear the brunt of it.

"She was being fast weaned away from me. We never spoke candidly together any more. I was concerned in my troubles, she in hers.

"It is that way, I suppose, when something goes wrong between married couples. She insisted that our boy should come and see us at times. We had to resort to all sorts of expedients to account for our moving into the shabby little flat.

"I was not sorry at her demand, because our boy's open, honest and upright nature had always had a sort of inspiring influence over his mother.

"Well, matters went from bad to worse. Marian never came to me, except to ask for money.

"One morning she came to my office and coolly

demanded five thousand dollars. What prompted her to ask for that exact sum was past my understanding.

"When I questioned her she explained that some dressmaker or other was holding up her wardrobe for the payment of a bill.

"She insisted that she had to have the money before the following day at noon, and in time to attend a dance given at the best hotel by this man Fredericks before his departure for New York.

"We did not quarrel, because I cut her off without a word and went back to my work, for it was a life struggle with me then.

"I knew Marian was furious, but I had ceased to care since I had found out beyond the least shadow of doubt that she was not playing fair with me and that she was a quitter.

"That night I dined late at the club and did not get back to our flat until after eleven.

"I noticed a taxi waiting in front of our apartment house, and as I entered I could see my wife in her room at the end of the hall dressing to go out.

"I knew by this time how wild she was for vanity-money, and something warned me to be secretive, to watch her and perhaps discover.

"She had not observed my coming and I slipped from the apartment without her knowing I had been there. I hailed a passing taxi and told the driver to follow the one I felt confident my wife would take. It was just as I——"

At this point Prescott was interrupted by the sudden entrance of the boy with the wanted envelope.

"Put it on the desk," he said curtly.

When he resumed the narrative, his voice trembled and his hand shook somewhat.

"Fredericks did not stay at the hotel as most

travelers do who expect to stay in the city only a short time. He rented a furnished suite of rooms in an exclusive down-town apartment house. I knew the place perfectly, for I had been there on one occasion.

"The taxi I was following at a safe distance, stopped in front of the building.

"Marian got out, paid the chauffeur and entered without looking to the right or left. It gave me the impression that she must have been there before. My blood was boiling.

"I dismissed my taxi a block away and watched. It was about twelve o'clock by that time. It is remarkable how long a man can keep alert, suffering damnable tortures.

"I suppose hate causes more vigils than love, but it wasn't exactly hate that tormented me.

"It was a sort of unhappy resentment at the ugly unfairness practiced on me by one I had grown to regard as closer to me than my own heart.

"While I stood across the street waiting and shivering, hour after hour passed by. What I suffered during those hours could not be put in words. She was with that man Fredericks, and he was keeping her in his apartment.

"I can still hear the clock in a distant church tower as it boomed forth the hour of five. And I can still see the first people as they past me like ghosts through the heavy fog.

"Suddenly the door was opened and a woman muffled in furs appeared. I recognized her instantly as my wife.

"The taxi which had brought her still stood at the curb She climbed into it rather hastily and was driven away. I did not follow her immediately.

"I was making a sort of a madhouse search

through my tired brain to find an excuse for—an excuse for this unpardonable crime.

"I wanted to talk to her lovingly as we used to do, to plead for an explanation. I think I must have had some such futile hope when I finally returned back home again.

"Our apartment was very quiet and my wife was soundly asleep, still dressed on her bed I did not try to awaken her, but looked around the room. She was always careless about money — it was characteristic of her that I should have found it openly exposed on the top of her dresser——"

"Found what?" Wayne cut in viciously.

"This, or rather the original of it."

As Prescott uttered the words he opened the envelope the boy had placed on the desk and handed his visitor the photograph of a check.

"You'll notice the signature and the amount," he said. "Five thousand dollars on the Providence Bank and Savings Company over the signature of Stanley Fredericks."

Wayne, without making a reply, handed the photograph back to Prescott.

"I took the original check at once to a photograph gallery on the corner," the latter continued. "Marian was still asleep when I returned it to her dresser. I went to my office and tried to do some work, but it was utterly impossible.

"I called up our flat several times, but my wife's maid always informed me that her mistress was still asleep. I went out to lunch, but could not eat. Upon my return, after a long walk about the city, I called again. It was then two o'clock.

"The maid told me that Marian had left the flat at one o'clock to do some shopping. That night I con-

fronted her with the facts. She denied first that she had been out of the house.

"Cornered about that, she lied about the money. She claimed that she had gone to a late dance with Fredericks and that he had brought her home about six o'clock.

"When I told her that I had seen her come from Fredericks' apartment at five o'clock alone, she turned pale, then flew into a rage.

"She told me brutally that I deserved what I got for spying on her and for denying her, what she called, the comforts every married woman is entitled to.

"I tried to keep myself under control, for I felt a wild desire to strangle her. When I asked about the check for five thousand dollars, she answered that no such thing existed. Then I showed her the photographic reproduction.

"Marian turned red, then white.

"'Well, I had to have that money,' she snapped. 'I asked you for it and you flatly refused to give it to me.'

"That nearly finished me. I stood there and just stared at her like a man bereft of his senses. I could not bring myself to believe that the woman who spoke these words was my wife.

"And yet, it was only too true. She still bore my name upon which she had put a stain that nothing could erase. But my first thought was my boy. I would a thousand times rather have died than have him find out how low his mother had fallen.

"And how grateful I was that he was away from home that day. My first impulse was to leave her on the spot but something impelled me to stay. She kept herself locked in her room.

"It was well toward evening when at last I suc-

ceeded to bring my mind out of chaos. A truck from the most expensive department store stopped in front of the building. Parcel after parcel was brought in. My wife, informed of their arrival by her maid, came to take charge of them.

"Then I realized what she had done with the money given her by Fredericks. She had spent every dollar of it on clothes. Think of it.

"I begged her to make an end to that sort of a life, promising to forgive her. She laughed in my face. And she laughed when she advised me to get a divorce.

"Under the conditions there was nothing else for me to do. I left her and immediately instituted divorce proceedings. The man I named as co-respondent to the suit, hastily left the city. An attempt to locate him proved futile, for he was somewhere on the sea in his private yacht.

"When the case came up for trial, Marian did not appear to defend herself——"

"She told me that," Wayne interrupted.

"Did she?" Prescott said bitterly. "Well, she needn't boast about it. Of course, it made it easier for me. A contested suit would have meant considerable publicity, and I was ready to go to any extreme to save my son's spotless name from the smirch of the thing.

"Quite naturally, I had easy sailing. No demand for alimony was forthcoming, and the judge awarded me custody of the boy without a question.

"And what a blessing it was for him. Now then, Mr. Wayne, you know the whole hideous story. There isn't a word I could add. I hope you are entirely satisfied."

Wayne wanted to make some sort of a reply, but somehow his voice failed him.

Prescott had turned to his desk and was folding

away the papers that were spread over the blotter. It seemed that he had entirely forgotten his visitor.

The other rose a trifle unsteadily.

"I am obliged to you, sir," he said, rising.

"It is an obligation to neither of us," replied Prescott, resuming his usual business-like tone as he held out his hand. "But it was a cruel sort of kindness to you to tell you the facts as they exist."

"Yes, so it was." Wayne shook hands and turned away.

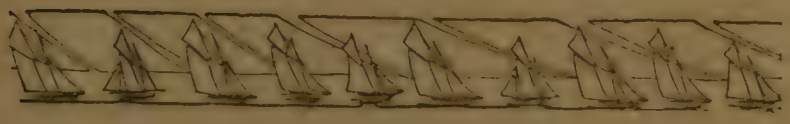
At the door he stopped.

"Did you ever meet this Fredericks after that?" he asked.

"No. Neither did I have the least desire to meet him face to face, for if I had, there would have been murder done right then and there. You see, my thoughts are all of my boy. I could not afford to have the newspapers inform him that his father had killed the man who degraded his mother."

"Ah, I understand." Wayne answered. "Goodby."

He opened the door, passed out quickly and closed it behind him with more vigor than he intended.



Chapter 240

A BOX OF CHOCOLATES

NO WOMAN in history experienced a more horrible sensation than did Alice Gordon when she recognized Phil's first wife in the person of Marie Desmond, the governess. The knowledge of having perhaps fatally injured little Phyllis was nothing compared with the shock brought on by the frightful realization of her own position.

It was characteristic of her to think of herself only. And it must be admitted that she had indeed something to think about this time.

If the truth leaked out that Phil's first wife still lived, she was branded for life. Although unintentional, her marriage with Gordon was nothing less than a period of adultery.

She had never been his wife in the eyes of the law, nor in the sight of Heaven.

Ah, how well she remembered hearing Phil tell her before they were stepped to the altar in Paris, that he had dropped divorce proceedings against Marie as soon as he heard of her having been killed in that explosion at the steel mills in Gary.

Why hadn't he gone through with that as a mere formality? It was because of his failure to do so that she found herself placed in such a frightful predicament.

There was only one way out of this. Marie must be removed by fair means or foul. And Alice was never known to stop at little things if her welfare was threatened.

She scarcely saw the gathering crowd. She did

not hear the cries of the little girl's mother, nor the angry exclamations which came from several women in that constantly growing crowd.

It was the sight of a police officer that stirred her into action. She swiftly backed the car into a side street, then turned around and fled.

A moment later the officer took command of the situation. A few terse questions brought the information he wanted.

"Who was the woman in that car?" he asked.

None of the bystanders knew her, and Marie was too hysterical to speak.

"Did any of you get the license number?" he demanded half in anger.

A general shaking of heads was the only reply.

Then he turned his attention to the injured child which was being tenderly carried into the cottage by Marie. There was genuine sympathy under his rough exterior.

"You take care of her for a few minutes and I'll run and get a doctor," he said. "And I'll try to find the owner of that car which struck the child."

But before he left the scene of the accident, he dispersed the gaping crowd.

The grief-stricken mother carried Phyllis into the living room and placed her on a couch.

She was no longer weeping or lamenting, although her heart was near the breaking point.

"Speak to me, baby," she whispered as she knelt at the side of the little girl.

But Phyllis' eyes remained tightly closed.

"Oh, it was my fault," Annie accused herself, weeping bitterly. "I should not have left her alone out on the lawn."

Marie did not hear her. She was staring after

nately at her still unconscious little girl, then at her boy, who stood a few paces away, crying softly to himself. Finally she motioned to Annie to take him upstairs.

The doctor arrived presently. With stony quietness the mother watched his very move as he examined Phyllis.

"Are you the child's mother?" he inquired as he finished.

The question startled Marie. She had not been prepared for it. For a moment she stood without knowing what to answer.

It seemed that her mental faculties were paralyzed. With a tremendous effort she pulled herself together. There was only one thing she could say under existing conditions.

"No—no!" she gasped, pressing her hands to her breast. "I—I am her governess. But tell me—is she seriously hurt?"

"So far as I am able to ascertain, no bones are broken," the physician responded. "There is a possibility, however, that the child may have sustained internal injuries. I suggest that her mother be sent for."

Again Marie was at a loss what to say. She did not want to tell him that the girl's mother was right in the same room.

Nor could she bare the fact that it was Phyllis' stepmother who had run her down. She found herself in a terrible quandary.

At that moment Phyllis began to stir, and she opened her eyes. Suddenly she sat up.

"Well—well!" exclaimed the doctor, intensely surprised. "How are you?" You are not hurt so bad after all."

For an answer she held both of her arms out to her governess.

"Thank God!" the latter murmured fervently as she pressed the little girl to her bosom. "How are you, darling?" she cried aloud. "Does anything hurt you?"

"Only my leg," Phyllis replied with a painful smile.

Again the physician examined her and found that there was a slight fracture of the bone above the knee.

"I guess I—I won't have to send for her mother, doctor, will I?" Marie whispered to him. "Why alarm her unnecessarily? I'll take care of her, and with your help we'll pull her through."

The doctor nodded.

"We'll pull her through without the least trouble now," he declared. "All our little patient needs is quietness and plenty of rest. She appears to be somewhat nervous from the shock."

And it was true Phyllis was trembling in every limb. After writing a prescription, the physician departed, promising to call again the next day.

As soon as he was gone, Marie carried the little girl upstairs to her room. Annie and Harry cried out with joy when they saw Phyllis.

"God was nice to us, wasn't He, Miss Desmond?" he said, fondling his sister. "Phyllis will get well again, now."

Marie swallowed hard.

"Yes," she responded, her voice very soft, "God was indeed nice to us. Your sister will be alright again in a few days. Only you must be a good boy and not annoy her."

"I won't," Harry promised

Annie was sent to the drugstore to get the prescription filled. An hour later the little girl dropped off into a sound sleep.

With an intense sigh of relief, Marie leaned back

in her chair and closed her eyes. Her lips were moving in a silent prayer of thanksgiving.

And then she began to recall all the incidents in connection with the accident. It never occurred to her, that in her excitement, she had betrayed the fact that she was Philip Gordon's first wife.

She could not even remember just what she had cried as the car driven by Alice struck Phyllis. But she remembered Alice vividly.

She could still see the ghastly pallor of her face, and the horrified expression in her eyes.

But why had Alice backed away and fled so precipitately after the accident? The least she could have done was to remain until the extent of the child's injuries had been ascertained.

Finally Marie came to the conclusion that Phyllis' stepmother sought to escape because she believed that she had killed the child.

And the fact that she had not called to find out how badly Phyllis was hurt, seemed to indicate that she had no desire to see her name in print in connection with the accident.

As the next few days passed, Phyllis improved rapidly. She limped a little when she walked but otherwise bore no mark.

In her weekly letter to Phil, the governess failed to mention the accident. She knew that if she did, the little girl's father would rush to Miami on the first train.

And the very thought of having him near her now sent a chill down her spine.

When Marie again resumed her afternoon walks along the beach with the children, she did not see Alice nor any of her companions. Quite naturally she took it for granted that they had left the famous southern

resort.

It was true, that Mrs. Courtney and the two men had left, but Alice was still close—dangerously close.

One evening as Marie came downstairs after having put the children to bed, she sat down in the living room to read for a while. Annie had gone to see a picture show.

Suddenly she heard a peculiar noise. It sounded very much as if someone was trying the rear door. For quite a while she sat rigid and listened intently.

Marie rose somewhat abruptly and went out to investigate. She unlocked the door and looked out. There was no one to be seen, but she thought she heard the swift patter of feet across the lawn.

After considerable thinking, she arrived at the conclusion that sneak thieves were prowling about. Recently a good many thefts had been committed during the absence from their homes of suburban residents.

Perhaps they had approached the cottage from the rear, thus failing to notice the light in the front living room.

Although somewhat disturbed, Marie returned to her book. It was her wont to wait for Annie when the latter went out at night.

The clock had just struck ten, when the front door burst open and the maid rushed in, pale and excited.

"Why, what is the matter?" Marie asked, rising from her chair.

"Oh, I am so frightened," Annie exclaimed

"What happened?"

It took some time before the maid could get sufficient breath to speak. Finally she said between gasps:

"When—I came through the gate, I—I saw someone hiding behind the shrubbery. I couldn't tell whether

it was a man—or a woman. But I believe that burglars were trying to get into the house."

Marie shook her head and smiled. While she had her suspicions, she did not want to add to the maid's fear by relating that she had heard someone at the rear door earlier in the evening.

"You must have been mistaken, Annie," she said quietly. "No doubt you imagined you saw someone hiding behind the shrubbery. As for burglars trying to break in here, forget it. They only pick out the homes of the wealthy. We haven't anything worth stealing."

Annie appeared to become reassured, but she was still in doubt. As she prepared to retire for the night, she went to every door to make sure that it was securely locked.

Nothing occurred to alarm the two women that night, nor the next. But the day following, something unexpected happened.

The mail carrier rang the door bell with more vigor than usual on his first trip. Marie answered the call and was surprised when a neatly tied package was handed to her with a letter.

The letter and the package bore special delivery stamps.

"Sign for them, please," requested the mail carrier.

Marie did so, then went into the living room to find out who the sender of the letter and package could possibly be.

She opened the package and found it to contain a box of fine chocolates. She reached for a piece to sample it, but something seemed to warn her not to eat.

Dropping the candy, she inspected the letter. The handwriting on the envelope was that of a stranger. It was undeniably that of a man.

"I wonder who should want to send me candy?" she mused as she tore the envelope and drew out a carefully folded sheet of scented paper. "I haven't any close friends or admirers here in Miami."

But she did have, according to the letter, which read as follows:

Dear Miss Desmond:

For some time I have been watching you as you strolled along the beach with your maid and two children, and the impression you made on me was more than favorable.

When I took the trouble to find out who you were, I was happy to learn that you were not the mother of those children, but their governess.

It is a genuine pleasure these days to see a young woman with such obvious refinement and demureness.

If I were to tell you that I think you the most beautiful woman I have ever met, you must believe me to be a flatterer. I am not that, I assure you.

Several times I have been on the verge of speaking to you, but somehow my nerve failed. Nothing in all the world could please me more than be permitted to call on you.

May I hope that you will grant me that pleasure?

I have taken the liberty of sending you a box of chocolates. When you eat them, won't you think of the lonely man who is longing to speak to you?

Yours longingly:

James Gregg.

Care Miami Hotel.

Marie folded the letter again and placed it back in the envelope. For a moment a smile played about the corners of her sensitive mouth, then she grew serious. What fools men were, anyway!

She was well aware that admiring eyes followed her whereven she went.

The sender of this big box of candy must have been hit hard. The chocolates looked tempting. Not for a moment did she suspect that it might have been mailed to her by someone who sought to harm her. This candy could not be poisoned.

Slowly her hand stretched out. Although she intended to send the box back to this James Gregg, one piece would not be missed.

Her red lips opened and closed again. The outer coat of the chocolate was delicious And then she swallowed.

Chapter 241

MRS. PRESCOTT'S STORY

WALTER WAYNE'S visit to the office of Mr. Prescott had not weakened his desire to make the lovely widow his wife. He was like most young impetuous lovers—he refused to believe everything that had been told him about the woman who owned his heart. A vehement denial would cause him to stamp the entire story as a vicious lie.

It was to get that denial that he called at Marian's apartment an hour later. But the moment he saw her, he felt that even her failure to deny would make any difference.

She was still as a statue amid the disordered litter of her sewing which cluttered the cozy living room floor. Her white face was turned to him searchingly as she tried to read her fate. But Wayne saw no appeal for pity in her steady eyes.

"You—you have seen him?" she inquired in a low breath.

Walter Wayne nodded.

"Yes, I met him at his office, Marian."

Her next question came in an almost inaudible whisper:

"And he told you, Walter?"

He nodded again and advanced a few steps. It seemed that an unsurmountable barrier had suddenly risen between them.

"Everything, Walter?" Her words came in a whisper.

"I think he told me everything," he said.

"Did he tell you about—about that night?" Her slender hands went to her heart.

"Yes."

"That I spent half of that night with — with Fredericks?"

"Yes, that too."

"About my selfishness, my vanity — the things that caused me to encourage Fredericks and go to him that night?"

"Yes—yes."

"And did he tell you what sort of a man this—this Fredericks was, and what it meant to a woman who took money from him?"

"Mr. Prescott made it all very clear," Wayne said a little impatiently.

"Did he also tell you the amount I got from—from Fredericks?"

"He showed me a photograph of the check, Marian."

She shrank against the wall, and her body seemed frail and beaten. In her eyes, now dark with something he could not fathom, had come a look that was almost tigerish.

"Ah, he still keeps that," she gasped. "I might have known."

After a distressing pause she said:

"You must have talked with him for a long time, Walter."

"For over an hour," he answered.

"Did he mention my—my——" Her voice seemed unable to form the word. "My boy?"

"Mr. Prescott spoke of him several times," he admitted.

Wayne took another step toward her, for she seemed swaying and about to fall.

But at his approach she stiffened proudly and motioned him to keep his distance.

"Then you have everything — everything that could be said against me, Walter," she said quite distinctly. "And now, why do you come to me?"

Never in his life had Walter Wayne been swerved from a purpose. And he would never give up a thing he meant to possess.

In her present distress Marian Prescott had taken on a new loveliness No matter what had happened, his very soul cried out for her.

He sprang forward to take her in his arms, but she held him at bay with a pitiful motion.

"Can't you see why I came back to you, dear?" he asked in a strained voice. "The minute he finished his story I wanted to fly to you and tell you that all the stuff I had been hearing was falser than a lie — a mess of half truths. That is why I have come.

"I wanted to take you in my arms without further parley or explanation and tell you that I love you more than ever. I couldn't live without you. I don't care what the world says about you. The past is behind and why even think about it?

"You and I will go somewhere where not a soul knows us. I'll take you to the end of the earth if you want it. Good God, girl, there isn't a thing I would not do for you and do it gladly."

She covered her eyes and her answer came in a sighing wail:

"Ah, can it be possible that I have found it at last?"

"Found what, Marian?"

"A man who is willing to believe in me after all that——"

"Please, not another word," Wayne cut her short.

"I won't have it. I am going to trust you with everything I have, yes, even my very life. Is that not enough, Marian dear?"

When she remained silent he stepped closer and tried gently to unclasp her hands which were locked rigidly across her face.

Suddenly her slender arms went around his shoulders.

With a low cry of joy he crushed her to his breast. The convulsive motion of her body told him that she was weeping.

"Let me rest here for a little while," she said at last very softly. "Ah, how I need this rest. Your big heart seems to give me back the comfort they have stolen from me. Ah, Walter, dearest, do you mean all you just said to me? And will you never, never be sorry?"

"Never, sweetheart," he assured her passionately. "I believe in you and I trust you."

He rested his cheek against her hair for a moment.

Then their lips found each other in their first kiss. But he was hungry for the touch of her sweet lips and he took his fill.

Finally she disengaged herself gently and drew away.

"You have heard my former husband's story," she said, her lips quivering, "and now you must hear mine."

"But, Marian," he protested, "I don't want to—to hear——"

"Please let me have my own way about this, dear," she begged. "You must hear me in justice to myself. You were told that I was mercenary and vain, that I spent great sums of money for pretty clothes.

"That I can not deny. But I did not make the

greatest sacrifice a woman can make because I wanted clothes. Not at all, my dear friend. You must hear the whole truth, though ugly it is."

"I don't want to hear it, Marian," Wayne persisted.

She took his face between her hands.

"Do you love me?" she asked, tears blinding her.

"With all my heart and soul, sweetheart."

"Then let me have my way. I shall feel better and you will feel better for knowing something Mr. Prescott did not tell you because he did not know."

He gave his consent with visible reluctance.

"Now sit here, close beside me," Marian said, pointing to a chair and do not interrupt me. I must tell you everything in my own way."

Wayne took the seat, his eyes averted.

"You know," the woman began, "that woman-love is different from man-love. There are two distinctly separate standards. A man may love where he pleases, break all the commandments and still hold his head very high.

"A woman is expected to be virtuous at all times. The least slip, and her good name is gone forever. I have known a woman who committed an indiscreet act twenty years ago.

"To this day her name is never mentioned without a slur. And those of her own sex are her worst enemies. That is the great pity of it. She finds the worst slanderers among her own sex.

"As you no doubt were told, I married very young. It was a hard struggle for both of us. Fortune favored us in two ways, for it brought us wealth and the baby.

"We raised the boy with the greatest care because my husband was fastidious about his family honor."

Continued in next number

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